

## **Fighting on the Edges: The Nature of War in 2020**

**by Major General Robert Scales, USA (ret.)**

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If the past is prologue a decade and a half will produce very little change in the nature and character of warfare. Nor will the technologies, structures and apportionment of the defense establishment change all that much either. Bureaucratic friction, fiscal inertia and the traditional cold war fixation on big ticket programs and platforms will ensure that apportionment of the budget among services and agencies will remain about where it is today.

The enemies most challenging to our vital interests will continue to challenge in familiar ways. Systems and organizations currently undergoing transformation will continue along expected courses. Change will occur in the margins driven more by changes in the enemy's attitudes and actions toward the United States rather than by any farsighted directional shift made either by enemies or by US policy makers anticipating a new era of warfare. During the Cold War dominance of the global strategic environment allowed the United States in large measure to influence the course of military confrontations and more often than not the actions of the enemy. The Soviet Union might have reacted forcefully to American actions but ultimately they danced to the tune played by the United States. In this new era of conflict it is the United States that must play to the tune composed by others whose actions remain both unfamiliar and difficult to anticipate. In a word, the initiative has shifted to the other side. The course of conflict, its nature and shape will be determined by red, not blue.

The world of 2020 will remain threatening across the entirety of the spectrum of conflict: from unconventional warfare on the left to the threat of thermonuclear warfare on the extreme right. By then the United States will have gained an even more secure hold on the middle of the spectrum. Even with fiscal discipline driven by a burgeoning deficit the American military dominance in precision strike and the ability to see the battlefield with great clarity will prevent an enemy's ground forces from winning conventional set piece land engagements. The United States will continue to own the seas and skies. While non

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western enemies may gain the wealth to acquire sophisticated air and sea weapons they will not likely gain the organizational skills to employ them with any degree of competence. Simply put: those nations capable of practicing the western way of war competently will not fight us and those inept in the practice will. It is a curious fact and testimony to the horrifically high price western warfare demands that it would be in America's best interest for competitors to spend themselves into penury chasing a conventional western style technological advantage that they will never be able to apply effectively on the battlefield.

However the more solidly the United States dominates the middle the more likely an enemy will seek advantage at the ends. Adversaries will continue to internalize the lessons from recent conflicts. They have learned that the only profitable way to challenge American conventional superiority will be to threaten at the extreme ends of the spectrum: either on the right by possessing nuclear weapons and demonstrating the resolve to use them to impede American intrusion or on the left where unconventional methods will allow a disadvantaged adversary the means to turn a short sharp war into a lengthy and costly war of attrition.

The war against a terrorist ideology will continue to demand that the United States focus on its Middle Eastern adversaries, both state and non state. Losing a conflict there exposes America's most vulnerable center of gravity: available fossil fuels. While other regions may harbor terrorists only in the Middle East are the densities of Islamic fundamentalists sufficient to create a mass of evil sufficient to threaten the vital interests of the United States. Perhaps in the distant future enemies may appear in other regions but for now the only true threat comes from the Middle East. Middle Eastern enemies gain strength in the knowledge that while they are 0 and 7 when fighting wars western style against Israel and the United States so far at least they can claim a record of 5-0-1 in unconventional fights against Israel, the Soviet Union and the United States. Even a leader with the intellectual vacuity of Saddam Hussein understood this fact the second time around and eschewed the use of fighter aircraft, tanks and integrated air defenses to favor fighting in pickups, SUVs and on foot using shoulder fired SAMs, AK 47s and RPGs. Success is there for all to see and emulate. There is no reason not to expect that

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Middle Eastern enemies will deviate from this pattern of behavior over the next decade and a half.

From a grand strategic perspective not much will change over the next fifteen years. In spite of the certainty of the threat from the left the United States has no choice but to remain strong at all points along the spectrum. Most of the nation's resources will be devoted to holding the center. Without question, the maintenance of overwhelming air and sea strength must remain a cornerstone of American defense policy. In the future as the practical application of warmaking activity shifts toward the left conventional air and sea weapons will increasingly become more conventional instruments for deterrence rather than weapons to be employed in great numbers against competent enemies who possess and can use them effectively.

This change in warmaking emphasis will demand a subtle realignment of defense priorities in which air and sea components will contribute to a strategic holding action intended to hedge the advantage in these dimensions. The long term goal will be to build and improve air and sea capabilities just enough so that America might remain uncontested on the seas and in the air while committing the Air Force and Navy to the greater and most dangerous task of improving their capabilities for supporting a protracted Middle Eastern ground war fought at the center- left of the spectrum. Seapower in particular must remain visibly robust in order to prevent others from making a run at American hegemony on the seas. The most sweeping change in naval posture will be directed toward the task of supporting actions ashore. Specifically, they will slowly begin to transfer funds from air and missile defense and big ship programs and increase the numbers of systems devoted to getting ground forces to a distant theater quickly and supporting them with fires one ashore. Increasingly the "Navy Marine Corps Team" will become an anachronism as the Navy begins to devote a more proportionate balance of resources to support all ground forces acting together in protracted ground campaigns.

Air forces, to include aerial systems from all services, will continue to be a deterrent hedge essential for maintaining America's absolute dominance of the third dimension.

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Dominance of the air will remain the sole nonnegotiable advantage of American military power. The fundamental premise of the American way of war is the assumption that the battlefield will always be safe from enemy aerial intrusions. The focus of air forces will gravitate downward. The challenge over the next decade and a half will be to improve the manner in which the aerial arms exploit this dominance on the ground...in a cost effective fashion. Thus the air to air function will diminish in proportion to the lessening of the enemy air threat. Job one will be the increasingly more challenging task of transporting ground forces to distant and relatively inaccessible places, sustaining them there and providing them with discrete, surgical, timely and intimate precision fires.

Not much can be said in terms of defense policy regarding the right of the spectrum. The United States to be sure will be challenged to keep the number of nuclear club members to a minimum. The only heartening prospect is that with the exception of Iran and Pakistan most nations that succeed in joining the club will do so without creating much of a threat to American strategic interests. Even Pakistan's membership will remain relatively benign. Pakistan's nuclear face off with India is simply none of our business and as long as the spread of radical Islam doesn't infect that nation the odds of a nuclear threat to the United States from there remains remote. The principal task at the right end will be to thwart nuclear blackmail from states tempted to join with Islamic fundamentalists to create nuclear mischief.

Given that the focus of American strategic interest will be on prosecuting military operations at the left end of the spectrum what do these realities portend for the future of warfare? First, Heisenberg's law is at play on the left. The increased attention placed there by the world's greatest super power and the reaction to that attention by Middle Eastern enemies will change the shape and slope of the spectrum considerably. Conflicts there will become more frequent and protracted. The spectral lines will become compressed on the left as the dividing line between conventional and unconventional war will continue to merge.

Battle lines will solidify along the traditional fault line between Western and Islamic cultures. As the magnet of intercultural conflict increasingly draws both together the

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probability that the United States will be obliged to fight any mirror image culture such as Western Europe, Japan or even China will grow increasingly remote. Enemies in the Islamic world will spot us dominance of the air and sea in exchange for the opportunity to fight a protracted ground war that begins on the extreme left with protracted terrorist actions in the region and within the United States and continues far enough to the right to embrace distributed, dispersed, low intensity conventional battles intended to capture the allegiances of indigenous people and to discredit American influences there. Our enemies have learned that our most vulnerable center of gravity is on the ground. So their greatest challenge is to prepare the ground to best defeat us. Preparing the ground infers the need to create conditions on the ground in which his advantages are maximized and ours minimized.

Several timeless imperatives will continue to influence warfare on the left. The global strategic center of gravity increasingly will focus on populations rather than terrain. Thus controlling countries should be done only with the population in mind. Rather than points for objectives we will find populated areas that must be controlled to contain and turn populations to our side. Enemies already have been taught the lesson that America military prowess diminishes with distance and remoteness. Since the enemy controls the strategic initiative he will choose points of conflict in the farthest corners of the region or even in more remote battlegrounds at the periphery of Middle Eastern territories. The enemy will continue to become more unapproachable by seeking to hide in the most remote sanctuary located at the very extreme corners of the Islamic world and, in some cases, in remote areas on the periphery of the Middle East: in Africa to be sure and perhaps in Islamic regions of Asia.

Experience in both Gulf wars has taught terrorist enemies and their Islamic fellow travelers the value of packaging military forces into small entities. By 2020 they will have perfected the techniques and technologies to create a true dispersed, distributed, protected “non-nodal” military capable of remaining viable in the field for extensive periods without exposing a vulnerable mass to the destructive effects of American precision. Non nodal will not mean small. The enemy must still be able to sustain a force that will be sufficiently large to take on American field forces when the opportunity

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arises. He will seek to capture the trappings of state or state like equities such as sovereignty, financial legitimacy and international recognition. No enemy will be capable of threatening a vital center of gravity without state support of some sort even if only symbolic.

While terrorist entities will succeed in capturing selected states they will gain greatest strength through political, economic and military dispersion. Their reach will be global with discrete entities netted together in a fashion that offers no assailable flanks or indirect approaches. Their networks will be cultural, not technological. Already they have learned to combine in loose coalitions of cultural fellow travelers. Unity and resolve will be achieved through the sharing of a common loathing of the West. Time and common purpose will be the glue that ties there cultural networks together. The longer these culture networks exist the stronger and more legitimate they will become.

They have learned the painful lesson that possession of cutting edge technologies expressed as weapons systems are merely an expensive means for creating lucrative targets. In the future the term “systems” will take on a different meaning to Middle Eastern enemies. Knitting together simple weapons and increasing their killing power through the use of simple craft technologies will allow enemies to make existing weapons far more effective against American forces. The advantage in this emerging contest between Eastern mass and Western quality could go to either side. Recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan reinforces the American experiences in Korea and Vietnam. In these earlier conflicts the margin in effectiveness between masses of simple weapons made better by simple craft improvements versus fewer but very effective (and expensive) weapons grew more narrow as the enemy learned how to take advantage of his simpler weapons and minimize the technological advantage of American weapons. The wonders of Rivet Joint, JSTARS, and Global Hawk fail to impress an infantryman who sees his contest between M4 and AK 47 as virtually a technological even match. Should an enemy over the next decade succeed in the relatively simple task of increasing the reach of shoulder fired heat seeking missiles a few thousand feet the result could well seriously threaten the ability of American airpower to provide effective precision fires and deliver ground combat power to remote regions.

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Wars against Middle Eastern enemies will be protracted with the dividing line between combat and stability operations becoming so indistinct as to become irrelevant. Ground forces will be obliged to stay engaged in a theater of war until all necessary conditions for peace and stability are met: social, political and military. Increasingly the American military will be driven to create forces (principally Army and Marine) capable of fighting effectively fully across the left end of the spectrum. A dispersed enemy will demand that ground forces disperse in turn. A patient enemy will create the requirement for ground forces to organize for sustained combat lasting years, perhaps even decades. This commitment is not for the constabulary functions attendant to peacekeeping. It is for combat—at times intense and at all times potentially deadly. In this new era of warfare mass will count. A low tech enemy committed to killing in the shadows will no longer allow machines to substitute fully for manpower. American killing power perfected by superior precision and aerial intelligence will in many cases be subordinated to the need to control people.

The American military learned in Afghanistan and Iraq that the center of gravity of this new style of war rests with the ability to control and influence the attitudes of indigenous peoples. Thus the art and science of killing must be refined such that when necessary it is done with great discretion, precision and speed. Restraint, patience and a willingness to accept less than complete destruction of an enemy force must become essential ingredients of American fighting doctrine. To be sure attitudes of population can be shaped by occasional demonstrations of shock and awe but shock and awe of a different sort represented by the ability to deliver overwhelming killing power at a place, time and on targets most likely to quell an enemy force, stun it into inaction and acquiescence rather than to incite it to further violence by creating resentment and hatred.

Given new realities those few opportunities for reshaping American military forces over the next decade and a half should be governed by several new realities and shaped by new initiatives. The need for protracted conflict at distant places against a determined dispersed enemy will eventually force a convergence of roles and functions between those charged with doing virtually all of the fighting and dying: Marine, Army and

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special operating close combat forces. This process of convergence will occur gradually as the practical demands of the battlefield overcome friction generated by traditional service cultures. The defense establishment will continue to resist increases in the number of close combat forces in the hope that a return to “net-centric” warfare will allow permit bloodless victories. But the numbers will increase nonetheless. Middle Eastern enemies will force the United States into fighting their way, a way that will demand a countervailing revival of the close in, dirty and bloody methods of war. This Darwinian imperative will drive the American military establishment to evolve a more robust and effective ground arm.

The processes for selecting, training and bonding infantry, armor, combat engineers and military police units will become more demanding. The realization will eventually sink in that mature, well trained and superbly led close combat soldiers will not only perform better for longer periods in combat but will suffer far fewer deaths as well. Those skills and qualifications unique to special forces will continue to gravitate to other less “elite” forces and the dividing line between them will blur. Eventually the fighting model of the Marine Corps will follow the close combat model of other services. Marine infantry units will accept the need for longer serving infantry at lower levels. Likewise the leadership models of close combat units will change. Leader entry will become more select as the ratio between leaders and followers will increase. The ground services will learn that the industrial age tables of organization can no longer accommodate the requirement for close combat units to remain longer on more isolated and dangerous battlefields.

These same universal imperatives will force the creation of more multi dimensional close combat forces. Army, Marine and special operational forces will be structured and trained to become more autonomous with the capability for fighting across the entire spectrum of land conflict. They will be required to move seamlessly between all levels of war and will acquire the ability to shift without interruption or pause from fighting to humanitarian tasks and back again as the exigencies of war demand.

These combat forces will become multifunctional as well as multidimensional. They will increasingly be required to perform a variety of tasks tangential to killing skills such as

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intelligence, medicine, civil affairs, civic action, information operations, direction action, nation building, etc. Superior training and selection alone will not be sufficient to create a body of men capable of performing with the degree of skill, knowledge, empathy and maturity needed for this new age of warfare. A cohort such as this can only be created within the culture of the American military by separating it from the routine, pedestrian track of today's recruiting and training systems and replacing them with a closed system focused exclusively on preparing combat soldiers through a long term process of socialization and unit bonding. Years of training and education will be needed to inculcate necessary skills and to raise soldier and leader competence to such a heightened level. Such a corps of professionals will be obligated to serve together continuously for years if not decades. The opportunities for reserves to join this new band of brothers will be very limited indeed.

From the height of the republican expansion to the fall of the empire the Roman Army succeeded in keeping the imperial peace and guarding the extreme limits of the empire by creating a very long service army that remained deployed and virtually at war for over three hundred years. Intense combats were rare, catastrophic defeats even more infrequent. The Roman Army learned to insulate itself from the vagaries and corruptions of Roman politics and even to some degree managed to fight effectively in spite of wrongheaded imperial strategy and incompetent and corrupt leadership. Enemies crowded at the periphery of the Empire remained subdued not so much by the aggressiveness of the Romans but by the realization that mischief in the form of direct or indirect confrontation was not an option given the reputation of the Roman Army for competence and persistence. Imperial service became mostly routine, engagement with peripheral cultures more important than active combat. Rome was not an armed state but a state that maintained its dominance by possessing an army that was more respected than feared, that commanded the borders through moral intimidation rather than continuous killing.

The American military does not protect an empire but it does protect vital interests whose geographical centers of gravity are nested at the extreme limits of military reach. As with

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the Romans long term tranquility in these regions can only be secured by a military equipped, trained and dedicated to protecting American interests over the long term. Success will come only when the world realizes that the American military and ground forces in particular are capable of winning decisively and staying the longer course of war until its strategic ends are met and sustained. America's new borders are a great distance from her shores. A military force engaged there can only be effective in the long term if it becomes an institution with staying power, and if it seeks to win through moral intimidation and patient engagement rather than continuous combat.